

'New Breed of Wealthy' Abandon Tennis for Polo

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syndrome a lot, so I don't talk about it much."

Polo has been booming as a spectator sport for the last five years, thanks in part to Prince Charles's sojourns to the United States. Not until recently, however, have large numbers of spectators begun riding onto the field as participants.

According to the United States Polo Association in Lexington, Ky., while the number of players in the nation remains small, it has grown about 50 percent since 1980, to 2,200, from 1,487. Moreover, the number of polo clubs has increased over the last seven years to 230, from 132.

'Part of the Leisure Revolution'

"It's become a more visible sport, and it's more accessible to more people," said William R. Hilliard, the executive director of the polo association.

To Major Dawnay, 54, an Englishman born in India and raised in Ireland, and a former captain of the British Army polo team, the rise of polo in the United States is "part of the leisure revolution."

The growing popularity of polo is particularly evident in southern California and Florida, but the New York area is another stronghold, particularly in the horse country of lower Fairfield and upper Westchester Counties.

One of the hubs for the sport is the Greenwich Polo Club here, at Conyers Farm, a 1,500-acre retreat for polo pros and aficionados.

A Mallet, a Helmet and 2 Ponies

The club was founded in 1983 by Peter M. Brant, a 40-year-old paper-mill heir and polo player who holds world-class championship matches on the club's two fields, each measuring 360 yards by 160 yards (roughly the equivalent of 11 football fields).

Conyers Farm has been on Major Dawnay's circuit for three of the last five years. He also conducts lessons in Jamaica, Australia, Ireland, Argentina and Palm Beach, Fla.

"The rich like to think that it's an elite sport," he said, "and when the Prince of Wales plays it you get the impression that it is only for the elite. But I'm not really sure how true that is anymore. It's not nearly as expensive as the world thinks it is."

With one exception — buying a horse — polo gear, which consists of a bamboo mallet, double-thickness polo boots, knee pads and a helmet with a faceguard, generally costs less than skiing equipment.

Polo ponies can cost from \$2,000 to \$30,000. But they also can be rented for about \$25 per per chukker (one of the six seven-minute periods that usually make up a match). Two horses, though, are needed by each rider. Polo rules state that the same horse cannot be used in consecutive chukkers.

'Not Just for Young Men'

"We also now have women playing polo," Major Dawnay said, "which is something we didn't see much of before, and the sport is one that can be played as one gets older. It's not just for young men."

"I've always been a rider, a hunter, a jumper," said Althea von Pein, 32, a student from Westport. "Now that it's opening up to women, I wanted to get involved."

Although some of his newer students confess that they fit, at least partly, the stereotype of the young urban professional, others said that learning the game is a logical extension of their love for horses and equestrian sport.

"I don't think that typical yuppies really love animals," Mr. Weston said. "The Wall Street types, they treat an animal like an athlete, and the typical yuppie still probably is more likely to be found over at the tailgate parties rather than on the field."

Relentless Instruction

At the Greenwich Polo Club, the tireless Major Dawnay provides 30 hours of lessons over seven days. During the first day, much of the students' time is spent on a wooden horse practicing swings, digesting their teacher's relentless instruction and admonitions to watch and imagine their hand (not the mallet) hitting the ball.

By the end of the second day, students graduate to "ball-and-stick" games and pickup matches. Attaining the fast-paced and dangerous level of a high-goal polo player takes longer — much longer.

"At the end of a week of lessons, they will be able to play in a game," Major Dawnay said, "but they will probably miss more than they will hit."

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